

# The Ethical Sensibilities of Digital Youth



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# youth participation in new media environments



opportunities

# The GoodPlay Project

digital youth:

some super-kids

some perpetrators

lots of confused kids

our focus:

ETHICS online

twitter

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The GoodPlay Project is sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media & Learning Initiative

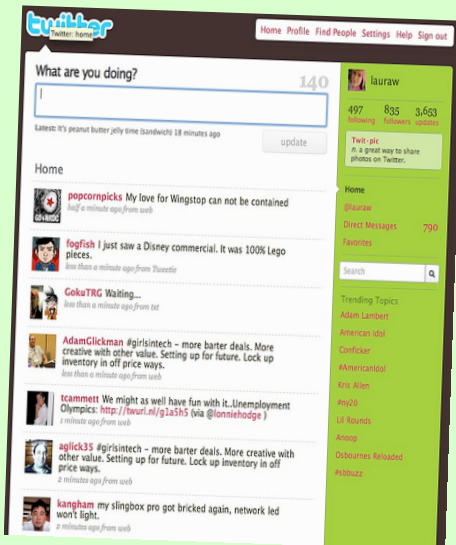
# qualities of new media environments

- **interactive and participatory** (Jenkins 2006)
  - opportunities to act **anonymously**
- dominance of **asynchronous** and **text-based** communication
- **distance** between actions & effects (Silverstone 2006)
- **persistence, replicability, and searchability** of content (boyd 2007)
  - “**scalability**”: the ability to reach a broad audience (boyd 2010, Shirky 2008)
  - “**always on**” and “**never alone**” (Turkle 2010)
    - capacity to **multitask**
  - lack of **adult** mediation (Bradley 2005)



opportunities & challenges

# Ethical fault lines in digital life



- **Identity** – When does identity play cross over into identity deception?
- **Privacy** – What are the boundaries of sharing information about oneself and others online?
- **Ownership and Authorship** – How has the act of creation been altered by digital media and with what effects on claims to ownership and authorship?
- **Credibility** – How do people signal their trustworthiness online and judge the trustworthiness of others?
- **Participation** – In a context of rapidly forming and disintegrating communities, how are norms of behavior established, maintained, and respected online?

# Researching GoodPlay



- Qualitative interviews
- 61 ‘digital youth’ ages 15-25 (Phase I)
- 40 ‘digital youth’ ages 10-14 (Phase II)
- Engaged in **social networking, texting, gaming, blogging,** and/or **content creation and sharing** online

- What are youth’s moral and ethical “ways of thinking”?
- Where/when/in what kinds of situations do youth engage in **ethical thinking** online?
- How do they **act**?

# Selected Findings

- **ways of thinking** about online life
- the role of **adults**



selected findings:

## ways of thinking online

### consequence thinking

- thinking about one's actions, or the actions of others, in an **individualistic**, consequence-driven way
- most prevalent way of thinking
- frequent topics: privacy; downloading; citation of online sources

# consequence thinking

*“You definitely don't use [your blog] as a place to go and bitch and whine..about your [downloading] sites you go to, and [think], job, your boss. I have known people who have lost their jobs because [their bosses] have downloaded this. I hope this doesn't get me in trouble if I gone and read their blog site [Laughter]...You definitely don't want to be one of those people.”*

*– female blogger, age 25*

selected findings:

## ways of thinking online

### moral thinking

- thinking about **interpersonal relations**, or those with whom one interacts directly
- considering others' feelings; showing respect; Golden Rule; fairness and justice
- somewhat prevalent in our sample
- frequent topics: conduct (in games, social networks), commenting, privacy, reputation

# moral thinking



*“You don't treat someone like a jerk because ... I don't want to say something (a comment) you're behind the microphone, you know. I think you should just treat someone the same way that it's uncomfortable... so I'll leave it, but just make sure that it's not anything that's a jerk thinking read, not anything that would be bad, cause bad reactions.”*

*– male social networker, age 15*

*– female social networker, age 18*

selected findings:

## ways of thinking online

### ethical thinking

- a capacity to think in *abstract* terms about the **impact** of online choices for a larger group, community, nation, and world
- rarest in our sample

# ethical thinking

*“HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN EDITING WIKIPEDIA?” I guess because I got more seriously involved with music, and I don't know. If I see something that's wrong, I'll say, I kind of started to learn about what illegal downloading. —  
Oh, someone might get the wrong information and I'll fix it. —  
Because if someone makes an article on that page that's affecting the music and career's, wrong information and it's suffering because that might affect them in a bad way. Apparently, if I see a page looking for information and there's incorrect information, I'll be affected in a negative way. So, I kind of think of paying it forward, almost.”*

*— male social networker, age 15*

selected findings:  
adult **moral/ethical** supports

AMONG OLDER YOUTH:

- few adult **mentors** or **role models** online

*“HAVE YOU EVER TURNED TO ANYONE (PARENTS, TEACHERS, PEERS) FOR ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO PRESENT YOURSELF ONLINE? No, because I think even though there’s a lot of room for error – that we can make a lot of mistakes online – generally, kids know what’s best for them online.”*

*– male content creator, age 20*

- some adults facilitate **questionable** online behaviors

selected findings:  
adult **moral/ethical** supports

*preliminary findings AMONG TWEENS*

- adults more **present** in tweens' online lives  
“friends” online, approve photos, monitor walls
- yet, **limitations** exist  
adults not a preferred or “go-to” source for advice
- dominant **messages**: safety  
= consequence thinking

# Implications / Problem Space



## opportunities

- to socialize, learn new skills, build communities, participate in public life

## challenge

- cultivating reflective and ethical minds

## puzzle

- role of adults

